

## FOREWORD

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John F. Kennedy  
Oral History Project  
First Transcript

The following discussion took place on 12 April in my quarters at Fort Myer, Virginia. Present were Mrs. Elspeth Rostow and Lieutenant Colonel W. Y. Smith.

General Taylor: The Boston Globe of 10 February 1948 carried on its front page a photograph of Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, Superintendent of West Point and Representative John F. Kennedy. It also carried an article describing a speech made by the General as guest speaker at the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Post Veterans of Foreign Wars anniversary dinner at the Copley Plaza Hotel. The article goes on to say that the General spoke about the Normandy invasion and in an interview before the dinner spoke about supporting universal military training along with Eisenhower and Bradley at least until the UN or some similar organization can make the world safe.

This account indicates my first meeting with John F. Kennedy. He wrote me at West Point some time before this dinner and invited me to come to the meeting and be the guest speaker. I knew Representative Kennedy by his war reputation and had a great interest in meeting him. Consequently, I accepted the invitation and appeared as scheduled.

My first impression was that of an enthusiastic, energetic and able young Congressman. Obviously one of long term promise. However, I would be less than candid not to say that it never occurred to me that I was sitting beside a future President of the United States. I found on this trip that President Kennedy was an old friend of Mr. Thomas White of Boston who as a captain had served as my aide in the 101st Airborne Division throughout World War II. Mr. White later became active in Boston in Senator Kennedy's campaign.

I did not have further personal contact with John Kennedy until I returned to Government in 1961. During my four years as Chief of Staff of the Army (1955-1959) I might well have expected to work with him in his capacity as Senator from Massachusetts. As a matter of

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Later on we took the same framework, adjusted it slightly, and had it the so-called Mongoose Committee, hardly a very euphonious title but a cover name for the group charged with the covert program against Cuba. So within this one framework I dealt not only with the covert activities of CIA world-wide, but the specific program against Cuba and the world-wide program to combat subversive insurgency. This committee (or committees) met on Thursday. We had a gentlemen's agreement that the principals would always be there if they were in town, and they were all very conscientious in observing this. We would meet at two o'clock and frequently run as late as six, dealing in a series with the 5412 issues, the counterinsurgency and the Cuban problem. In order to prepare the agenda and the follow-up actions resulting from these three committee meetings, I would say I probably devoted a couple of days on the average each week, leaving then the rest of the week, that is three days, for the ad hoc activities arising as my assignment as Military Representative of the President.

Mrs. Rostow: Sounds as though the job of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff might be an easier task.

General Taylor: Well, I think that's probably true. In addition in this period, I made two trips abroad. One was to NATO from the 18th to the 31st of March, 1962, going to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Berlin, and Italy, primarily to refresh my recollection, my knowledge of NATO problems. It was a very useful trip and it gave me an up-dated view of the NATO organization. It also for the first time made me painfully aware of the situation in our relations with France. One had to go to Paris at that time and talk to French officials to realize the bitterness that had grown into the relationship between our two governments.

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Similarly, as my appointment as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs approached, I took most of the month of September 1962 and visited the Far East -- Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia for an opportunity to have a fresh review of the problems on that side of the world.

Mrs. Rostow: Looking again at this period, could you tell us how the President reacted to the range of nuclear responsibility that fell upon him? Did his reaction, for example, in mid-1961 differ from his

response later on during the Berlin corridor crisis or later in the missile crisis? Did he have a sense that this was one of the great burdens that history had placed on his shoulders?

General Taylor: The President grew visibly as he became accustomed to wearing the Presidential mantle. The loss of confidence which he suffered in April 1961 was progressively replaced with a feeling of familiarity with his problems. He, of course, had been a very thoughtful observer of history long before he became President so that he had a basic knowledge of international problems upon which to build. I never felt the President was overwhelmed by his responsibilities. The only time I ever saw him visibly low was at the time of the Bay of Pigs. By the time he got to the Cuban missile crisis, which we will discuss later, he knew his team, and he knew his own potentialities; and he handled himself with rare coolness and confidence I would say.

Mrs. Rostow: We'll assume that it was in the spring of 1962 that Khrushchev decided to put MRBM's into Cuba. Was U.S. Intelligence somewhat at fault in not alerting us earlier?

[REDACTED]

General Taylor: I don't really believe so. The only faults I think perhaps were of nonfeasance. In September when we should have been increasing the activity of our reconnaissance flights it just happened that Mr. McCone was out of the country, and also I was. The 5412 Committee, which was generally charged with watching the tempo of covert overflights, was stripped down by 50 per of its regular membership. Whether we would have done anything differently had both of us been in the country I frankly don't know. But it is true that we allowed weather and a lack of a feeling of urgency to permit the over-flight program to move very, very slowly. That is really the only part of the intelligence program which in retrospect I regret.

Mrs. Rostow: Do you think that Khrushchev was acting on strength or weakness putting in MRBM's?

General Taylor: Well, I really can't say. It is still inexplicable to me what he had in mind. I must say when I first looked at the photographs which clearly showed the missiles, my first reaction was that this was a clear challenge; he had really written this out so clearly that we had to meet it; although he may have expected us to fall away and thereby gain a great political and psychological victory.

I don't think we have discussed adequately the counterinsurgency program. I really would think we might discuss it for a moment and hold up the Cuban discussion until the next meeting.

I mentioned before that I was very much struck in the early days of my association with the President with the keenness of his interest and understanding of the subversive insurgency problem. In reviewing the record before my arrival in Washington in April I found that from the very outset he notified his Administration that he was going to press to develop greater military capabilities in the insurgency field. I have a note here that says that at his first NSC meeting on 1 February President Kennedy asked the Secretary of Defense to examine along with other interested agencies the means for placing more emphasis on developing counter-guerrilla forces. I think that probably was the start of his official campaign to develop our counterinsurgency capabilities.

Following the Bay of Pigs crisis we recommended to the President that some permanent committee be set up which would be in effect the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the Cold War. This recommendation was not